Work-from/at/for-home: CoVID-19 and the future of work – A critical review

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ABSTRACT

The Covid19 pandemic has led to speculation about the place of offices in the future world of work – while working-from-home was initially mandated by employers (and governments), recent research has reported that the practice has gained popularity among employees. However, most such research is based on experiences of workers in the Global North. The article challenges the conflation of the Global North with global and shifts the focus from 'flexible working' and 'work-life balance' to issues of access to work infrastructures, including space, internet, and care. It draws upon existing scholarship on home-based work and precarious work, especially gig work, to outlines ways to analyse the implications of working-from-home in diverse settings. Illustrated with the story of Prachi, a young e-commerce worker in Delhi, the article offers work-from/at/for-home as a wider framework that accounts for inequalities in labour and life conditions of workers around the world.

1. Introduction

As parts of the world tentatively transition out of the Covid-19 pandemic, discussions about the future of work – in particular, how and where we will work in the future – continue. The pandemic propelled those segments of the workforce who could do so to work-from-home. Some headlines have suggested that offices have been rendered redundant (Chapman, 2020; Thomas et al., 2020; Wells, 2020); and recent research shows that only a small proportion of workers are keen to return to offices (Melin and Egkolfopoulou, 2021; O'Connor, 2021; Segal, 2021). These discussions, largely based on a history of work in the Global North, are commonly framed in terms of either a 'new normal' of flexible working or a 'return' to pre-industrial subsistence economy whereby home/household was the main site of work (Barker, 2020; McCarthy, 2018). Further, while they do take into account the implications of the space of work (home versus office) for social relations, such as, distribution of domestic and care work, they tend to assume general availability of physical infrastructure of work – desks, computers, internet, etc. In this article, I call for attention to experiences of emerging work practices in the 'Global South' both as a way to challenge the conflation of the Global North (and specifically UK and the US) with the 'global' as well as to position work-from-home on a continuum of ongoing work practices, rather than as a practice of the past or the future.

While the story of work in the Global North is usually narrated through that of industrial development, discussions of work in the Global South are framed in terms of 'informal' work and economy. Yet researchers are increasingly challenging the dichotomy between formal and informal work, standard and non-standard employment, and thus, the nature of work in the Global North and the nature of work in the Global South (Ferguson and Li, 2018; Gibson-Graham, 2008; Monteith et al., 2021). As such, I am attending to emerging work practices in the Global South, not as an 'exception' (Bhambra, 2014; Bhambra and Santos, 2017), but as developments that have been marginalised in the global scholarship on work. In this article, I specifically draw upon my long-term ethnographic research in Delhi to examine work-from-home through the lenses of home-based work and precarious work. Brought together, the extensive literature on contemporary home-based work in India and the emerging literature on precarious work around the globe, offer an insight into the relationship between social inequalities, work infrastructures, and emerging employment relations.

2. Home-based work

The ILO defines home-based work as paid work carried out in or around the home of the worker. Home-based workers are of two types – self-employed or 'own account' workers and sub-contracted or piece rate workers (Haspels and Matsuura, 2015). Work-from-home is distinct

from home-based work in that it is the transposition of waged work on to the premises of home. Despite this key distinction, there is much in the literature on home-based work that we can draw upon to apply to the practice of working-from-home. Although a traditional understanding of waged work would imply job security and bargaining power that is elusive in home-based self-account or contractual work, it is increasingly evident that wage work can also be, and contemporarily is precarious work (further discussion on this in the next section). Home-based work, as such, provides opportunity for exploring work patterns and relations that emerge when the space of home is the primary space of work.

Home-based work around the world is predominantly done by women, which is not a coincidence, but is rather indicative of both work patterns that are considered 'suitable' for women as well as work opportunities that are open to women. While comparison of, say, needle work at home in a small village in India and work for Facebook at home in London may at first seem somewhat rudimentary, there are important insights to be gained from the rich scholarship on home-based work in countries like India, where rather than being a thing of the past (pre-industrial or historic), it is a significant form of economic activity. Home-based work falls under the category of 'informal work' which employs an estimated 45 to 90 per cent of workers around the world (Haspels and Matsuura, 2015). In particular, two important issues emerge through analyses of home-based work – one, the invisibilisation of work done within the space of the home, a phenomenon that Mies (1982, 1986) calls 'housewifisation', and two, the limitations of converting home infrastructure, especially where it is deficient, into work infrastructure.

Maria Mies' (1982) study of lacemakers in the village of Narsapur in Andhra Pradesh is a pioneering study of home-based work in the context of globalisation and of the intersection of patriarchy and capital accumulation. Mies devises the concept of 'housewifisation' to refer to women's entrenchment within the home and the valuation of their work as non-work in the setting of home-based work. Recent literature on working-from-home has also reflected on women's increased burden of housework and childcare during the lockdowns (Chung et al., 2020; Collins et al., 2021), but the general (pre-Covid19) assumption that work-from-home is a choice whereas home-based work is driven by necessity and poverty has lingered on. As my own research, which I discuss later in the article, and recent developments show, this is no longer the case. In not drawing upon insights from home-based work, we would miss the opportunity to better understand the implications of working-from-home.

Recent research on work-from-home has also engaged with the issue of space, but largely with the understanding that 'Many white collar homeworkers try to replicate some aspect of the office in their home, whether through setting up a computer at a desk or the outfitting of an entire spare room' (Ng, 2010; Tietze and Musson, 2005, cited in Wapshott and Mallett, 2012: 66). This ignores the proliferating diversity of white-collar workers around the world which has now arguably come to include those who do not have the resources to set up a desk at home, let alone access to a spare room. The pandemic, indeed, forced even those who did not have work infrastructure at home to work-from-home with extremely limited resources. These limitations of physical infrastructure have been extensively explored in research on home-based work, with surveys collecting detailed data on the types of housing workers live and work in. For example, the National Sample Survey (NSS) in India offers information on the proportion of home-based workers working in 'own dwelling unit', 'structure attached to own dwelling unit', 'detached structure adjacent to own dwelling unit' and 'open area adjacent to own dwelling unit' (Samantroy, 2019). There is need for devising a similar framework for understanding experiences of working-from-home, perhaps with focus on access to and ownership of space, office equipment, and internet connectivity to account for diverse experiences around the world.

3. Precarious work

Similar to assigning temporality to work-from-home (a practice of the past or the future), precarious work has also been assessed in relation to the idea of job security in a bygone era of industrial boom. However, critics have asserted that precarity has historically been the enduring experience of the majority of workers in the majority of the world and that industrial job security was limited to few workers in specific parts of the world (Neilson and Rossiter, 2008). Despite the growing scholarship on precarity, work-from-home has rarely been explored through this framework, perhaps due to its association with corporate (and well-paid) white-collar work.

One emerging area of research where the association between home, work, and precarity has been made explicit is that of the gig economy. Gig economy is comprised of platform-based work, whereby 'self-employed' workers find and conduct work through digital platforms, such as, Deliveroo, Uber, Amazon Turk (Wood et al., 2019; Woodcock and Graham, 2020). Since the workers are not salaried employees, there is no job security or social protection, and increasingly workers are highlighting the exploitative conditions that they work under (Bhushan, 2021; Sharma, 2021). Al James (https://geoworklives.com/project) explores such digital labour through the lens of gender; challenging the myth that platform work can offer women work opportunities and work-life balance, his research shows 'how women's experiences of the platform economy vary spatially, between places with different industrial histories, labour market opportunities and urban infrastructures of care' (unpaginated). In highlighting the interdependence of work, home, and family, James uses the concept of 'work-lives' or 'working lives'. This concept provides a key intervention into understandings of precarious work – rather than confine precarity to employment and employment relations (see, for example, Kalleberg, 2009; Standing, 2011), it lays bare the connections between precarious labour and precarious lives (Millar, 2017).

The obvious site of management and negotiation of precarity then is the home or the household, where workers can aggregate labour (including non-income generating labour) to sustain livelihoods. Scully (2016) argues that for South African workers, precarity has compelled a shift from the 'shop floor to the kitchen table' as the site for strategizing livelihoods. Feminist scholars, such as Federici (2006) and Betti (2016), argue that women have always had a precarious relationship with waged labour. As such, for women, perhaps it is better framed as not so much a *shift* (as Scully suggests), but an intensifying reliance on the household for both income- and non-income generating activities. This provides an important framework for understanding working-from-home in relation to broader structures of labour and life.

Attending to experiences of working-from-home in the Global South makes it important to engage with the concept of precarity of working lives. As stated earlier, while it is waged workers who work-from-home, waged employment does not necessarily imply job security and social protection. Further, workers may also adopt several livelihood strategies simultaneously – alongside their (often poorly paid) wage employment, they may also invest in 'side hustles', carry out domestic and care work, and participate in education and training for 'better' futures. My own research, that I discuss in the next section, shows this to be the case. Therefore, rather than treating working-from-home as a discrete category, it needs to be understood more fully through the spatial-social dimensions of home, work, and leisure.

4. Work-from/at/for-home

Building upon and bringing together interdisciplinary scholarship on home-based work and precarious work, including recent scholarship on the gig economy, I propose an expanded framework of work-from/at/for-home – that is, work done from home is done *at* the site of the home and is done *for* the home – to highlight the relationship between different forms of work and account for inequalities in access to

infrastructures required for work. To explain further, I begin with the understanding that all forms of work should be understood in relation to other forms of work, rather than in isolation or in discrete categories of productive/reproductive, paid/unpaid work, formal/informal or standard/non-standard work. It is then important to understand work-from-home, not just in terms of work/life balance, but in a relation of interdependence with housework and care work, employability education/training, and 'side hustles', all aggregated at the site of household. Paying close attention to the relationship between work and home, the framework also highlights that work requires interrelated physical and social infrastructures. Work-from-home requires the physical infrastructure of space, equipment, and connectivity, and social infrastructure of time, rest, and care.

My own recent research demonstrates the need for this expanded framework (Islam, 2021). I have been conducting ethnographic research with young lower middle-class women in the 'new economy' of Delhi since 2016. When I first started fieldwork in Delhi, my interlocutors were working in a range of jobs across cafes, shopping malls, call centres, and small offices. In the last two years, some of them have shifted to work in e-commerce, a reflection of the growing size and importance of the sector in India. When the first Covid lockdown was announced in India in March 2020, Prachi, one of my interlocutors, like many workers around the world, was asked to work-from-home. Prachi, however, did not have a laptop/computer of her own or a broadband internet connection at home. Her employer, a small e-commerce start-up, provided her a laptop and topped up her (personal) mobile phone for data access. However, they could not address the issues of lack of internet connectivity in her neighbourhood or lack of space and desk and chair in her two-room house that she shares with her parents and four siblings.

It is difficult to understand Prachi's experiences through current framework of work-from-home, which largely offers an analysis of flexible working, work-life balance, and to some extent, issues of gender division of labour. In the time that Prachi worked from home, she found that, contrary to expectation, her work became more inflexible since her employers adopted an attitude of suspicion and hyper-surveillance. At the same time, she felt like an invisible worker during this time – without the opportunity to assert herself in the office, Prachi was excluded from decision making. These experiences were exacerbated by her family not taking her work-from-home seriously and compelling her into increased participation in housework that she had previously been able to escape by going to the office (Islam, 2020). With too much 'work' and too much 'life', Prachi did not make any references to work-life balance in this situation. Further, while to a certain extent, the gender division of labour in her family was as expected – women took on a disproportionate amount of housework – it was not necessarily equally distributed between women. Prachi was able to negotiate a reduced load of housework by emphasising the monetary contribution she was making to the family, thus complicating the dynamics of division of labour within the household. Prachi's example demonstrates some of the limitations of current understandings of working-from-home.

Prachi was compelled into working *from* home due to the circumstances. *At* home, the deficiency of physical infrastructure – she did not have a separate room to work in or a desk and chair to work at – was compounded by deficiency of social infrastructure – Prachi argued that if she were a man, her family would have been more forthcoming with provision of space as well as care. She made connections between precarious conditions of labour and life and negotiated these conditions by understanding all labour as *for home*. While critical of her family for non-recognition of her contribution to their sustenance, she was also critical of her employer for failing to recognise that office work cannot be the model for home work. The framework work-from/at/for-home, with reference to scholarship on home-based work and precarious/gig work, offers a way to account for these complexities by understanding home not only as the place of work, but also the space of work, comprised of physical and social infrastructures, and the site of aggregation of livelihood strategies.

5. Conclusion

The image of a well-paid white-collar worker (mostly a woman) working-from-home is no longer adequate to understand emerging experiences of work around the world. Indeed, the term 'work-from-home', while alluding to possible blurring of boundaries between home and work, still forces a division between paid and unpaid work, standard and non-standard work, and as such, between work and life. Can we reformulate our understandings of the practice so as to account for the ways in which 'Waged work and reproductive labour come together as possible strategies for enabling life' (Bhattacharya, 2018: 52)? This critical review offers an intervention by highlighting the inadequacies of current understandings of work-from-home, premised on experiences in the Global North. It suggests, based on ethnographic research with women workers in the service economy of Delhi as well as existing scholarship on home-based work and precarious gig work, that there is a need to expand the framework to better understand 'home' as the site of interdependence between various kinds of work. Doing so pushes us to see that 'in fact it is waged work that serves reproductive labour and reproductive labour that is the over-arching mode of all economic activity' (Bhattacharya, 2018: 52). Finally, this critical review is a call for further research beyond the Global North to diversify concepts for understanding emerging practices and the future of work.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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